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The Dragon and the Librarian // Katie Skipper

I was rudely awakened the night before my eighteenth birthday by someone shaking me by the shoulders. A knight stood over me. His armor was shiny and new, and the giant feather plume on his helmet was long enough to be a tripping hazard.

“Are you Princess Caramel?” he asked melodramatically. “I’ve come to rescue you from the dragon.”

Perhaps an explanation is in order. As was tradition, on my 14th birthday my parents had packed me up and dropped me off in a meadow near the mountains to be stolen away by a dragon. At the time I was gangly, all knobby knees and two left feet, not standard princess material at all. I was also impatient and quickly grew bored of waiting in the meadow looking helpless, which is what I had been instructed to do. So I pulled a book out of my bag and sat down to read.

I was so absorbed in my book that I almost didn’t notice when a giant red dragon with spectacles landed nearby. The gust of wind created by his wings knocked me from where I had perched on my luggage and sent me spilling to the ground. “My apologies, I didn’t mean to knock you over,” said the dragon in a deep voice. I scrambled up. “I am Robin the Dragon of the Lamentable Mountains. Dreadful name, but I assure you the mountains are really quite charming. And you are?”

“Princess Caramel,” I squeaked, trying to curtsy and dropping my book in the process. It was fashionable at the time to name your children after a food you craved while you were pregnant. I had fared much better than my sisters Potato and Brussels Sprout.

“A pleasure to meet you Princess Caramel,” said Robin. He held out a talon for me to shake. “Are you waiting for a dragon?”

“Are you looking for a princess?” I asked, pushing my glasses up my nose with one finger.

Robin smiled. “No, but I have a large library and am looking for a librarian.” This wasn’t mentioned in the tradition or in the lectures my parents had given me, but to my fourteen year

old mind seemed close enough. So I put my book away and climbed on Robin's back, whereupon he picked up my luggage and we flew to his castle.

The knight shook me again, rudely, as if uncertain whether I was awake. "Stop," I said, batting his hands away. "What do you want?"

"Princess Caramel, I am Sir Cabbage, and I've come to rescue you," he said. For a moment I feared for Robin, but then I remembered that the knight couldn't have killed Robin because dragons had been put on the endangered species list and so were safe from the predations of knights errant.

"Thank you, but I don't want to be rescued," I told him politely. Other knights had tried to rescue me, of course, but all had failed. For which I was grateful, because there were quite a number of books in Robin's library that he and I had yet to read and discuss.

The knight crossed his arms. "Of course you do, you just think you don't because of Stockholm Syndrome."

"No, I really don't think I want to go with you," I said. "I like Robin, we're good friends."

"I studied this in knight school," said Sir Cabbage, snapping his fingers so hard that the visor on his helmet fell down with a clank. He pushed it back up with a pained expression. "Sometimes a princess will feign disinterest in order to encourage a knight's interest."

"That's dumb," I said. "Why would someone do that?"

Sir Cabbage did not answer. Instead he swung me up over his shoulder, a position both undignified and uncomfortable, and scaled down the side of my tower. Once on the ground, he plunked me on his horse, and got on behind me.

It was traditional for a princess to weep for joy and thank her knight, perhaps bestowing on him a handkerchief as a token of her gratitude for her rescue. Instead I started to scream for Robin to rescue me. Sir Cabbage stuffed my handkerchief in my mouth while spurring his horse into a full gallop. So I sulked all the way back to my parent's castle and did my best to kick at Sir

Cabbage's shins, although without much success.

As was tradition, we were to wed the next morning. My parents, and Potato and Brussels Sprout were delighted to see me again. I continued to sulk.

The next morning came too soon. I was fitted in a white wedding dress with a corset that left me gasping for breath and a skirt so voluminous that I had to kick it with every step forward I took to avoid tripping on it.

"You look beautiful," said Potato, who I was happy to see looked much more like her namesake than last time I had seen her. She was lying of course; I looked very uncomfortable and vaguely constipated. I pushed my glasses up my nose with one finger.

"You shouldn't wear your glasses," my mother said, fluffing my veil. "It's not traditional for a princess to wear glasses."

"I don't want to be a princess," I told her stubbornly. "I want to be a librarian." This sort of complaining was acceptable because it was traditional for some princesses to be rebels, although usually that involved wishing to dress in men's clothing and secretly become a knight. This sort of complaining was also ignorable, which is precisely what my mother and sisters did, cooing at me instead and leading me out to the chapel.

I stumbled down the aisle on my father's arm to meet Sir Cabbage at the other end. Sir Cabbage was puffing out his chest. This took so much effort that his face was beginning to turn an unflattering shade of puce. As was traditional, at the end of the wedding service, the priest asked, "If any among us has any reason why these two should not be lawful wed, speak now or forever hold your peace."

There was a booming knock on the doors to the cathedral, before they burst open. Robin stood there, glaring at the congregation, who as one dove under the pews trembling in fear. "I am Robin, the Dragon of the Lamentable Mountains," he said with a growl. "And I've come to retrieve my librarian." I pushed my glasses up my nose with one finger and smiled.

My Fourteenth October // Casey Schmidt

The back pain started in August and September called it cancer. By October, my grandfather had chicken legs and his beer gut hung low off his sunken chest. The cancer was everywhere, in his lungs, in his brain, pushing behind his eye until it popped out farther than the other. I tried to pretend he was looking at me sideways, but the cancer-eye followed me more closely. I decided to shut mine when he talked to me. It ate holes in his head until the last day, when he went crazy and tried to jump out the window. He swung fists and screamed himself hoarse, throwing every curse he knew at my dad and uncles as they pushed him back into the bed he would die in later that night. By then, my mom was already driving us away from the hospital. My sister slept. I watched the leaves whisk by in the wake of the car and felt my world a little less full without him.